8 Mile or Base Line. Which is it?

by Rick Astley

Many of our driving events have started at 8-mile and Haggerty Roads, and some members unfamiliar with the area must have been confused by the signage that indicates both 8 Mile and Base Line in the east-west direction, so which is it?

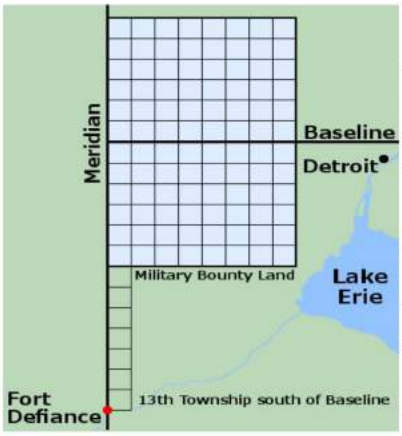
Sign at Haggerty and 8-Mile (photo Paul Sewick)

The answer is both, but the road was The Military Baseline before it was 8 Mile, the road being an important part of Michigan's history.

After the United States gained its independence, the new republic needed money, and to get it eyed the indian land no longer protected by the British. A land commission, chaired by Thomas Jefferson, was formed that lead to the Land Ordnance of 1785. The idea was to pressure Native Americans into treaties that would extinguish their rights to their lands and then sell that land. However, in order to be able to sell it, it had to be surveyed first.

The US Public Land Survey System would establish an initial point in a new territory and from there run a north-south meridian and an east-west baseline. These axes would then be used to count off 6 mile square townships.

(detroiturbanismblogspot.com)



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In Michigan, there were 96 townships to be established on a 12 high by 8 wide grid, with the meridian on the western edge and the baseline to run north of Detroit dividing the north south townships in two, 6 to the north and 6 to the south. In each US territory, the meridians and baselines were almost arbitrarily set and in Michigan it was decided that the north-south meridian should run directly north from Fort Defiance in Ohio, which was chosen because the Treaty of Detroit between the United States and the Native American nations ceded land to the US from that point. The east-west baseline was selected because of the necessity to avoid the Ohio border to the south and Lake Erie to the north. The baseline turned out to be thirteen 6-mile townships, or 78 miles, north of Fort Defiance.

When the Mile roads were established, the baseline became the reference point and happened to be almost exactly, but not quite, 8 miles north of Campus Marshes (originally Grand Circus), in downtown Detroit, where all the 5 spoke-like roads, (established in Detroit's grand plan after the fire of 1805) Woodward, Gratiot, Michigan, Fort and Grand River converge, and in that way, the baseline also became 8 Mile Road.)

The Illinois-Wisconsin border is said to have been set 50 miles north of the most southerly point of Lake Michigan, so giving Chicago enough lakefront to establish trading ports, but it turns out to be very far off that distance; too far to be a surveying error. However, the border is within the 1800's surveying accuracy of Michigan's baseline, so many believe it to have been the intended line for the IL-WI state divide.